NEWS

Winchester Soccer Club, town settle Muraco easement issue

CHRIS STEVENS | CORRESPONDENT

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The Winchester Soccer Club and town officials have settled the issue of an easement for the Muraco culvert project to continue. FILE PHOTO

It was beginning to look like the summer season would kick off w
special Town Meeting, but a deal between the town and the Winc

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Soccer Club over an easement for the Muraco culvert project has been reached.

However, the details, including the cost of that settlement, has not been made public, according to Select Board Chair Michelle Prior.

At issue is a piece of land under the control of the soccer club, but needed by the town for an easement so work can continue on the Muraco culvert project. The project is the last piece of the town's Aberjona Flood Mitigation Program.

The Muraco culvert project has been ongoing since 2021 when voters approved a Proposition 2 ½ debt exclusion override and Town Meeting authorized the borrowing of $9.11 million.

In November 2023, Town Meeting bumped up the borrowing to $10.2 million and in May, Town Meeting approved another $2.6 million to cover cost increases.

And Select Board member Bill McGonigle noted Monday, the project will take 70+ homes out of the flood zone and "it will help a lot of people's lives and a lot of people's pocketbooks."

During a Select Board meeting June 2, Prior said the board had been in communication with the soccer club regarding the easement since January. She said she planned to make a "best and final offer" for the easement later in the week, but if that failed, the town would hold a special Town Meeting to take the easement by eminent domain.

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The board voted 4-0 to set the special Town Meeting for June 23, a
last day of school. Prior called the date calendar driven. The goal was to

have the issue resolved prior to the Fourth of July when many people would likely be gone and given that the meeting must be posted 14 days in advance, June 23 was the earliest possible date to meet.

“It’s unfortunate to have to use a blunt instrument like eminent domain on a project of this size,” said Select Board member Michael Bettencourt at Monday’s meeting. “We should be careful with it. it’s not just a tool to get a negotiating advantage, that is my concern, but again, I’m on the board of the soccer club. I have a different perspective and I will be recusing myself.”

Prior noted the soccer club would not only be compensated by the town, but it would also benefit from the work.

Select Board Bill McGonigle agreed eminent domain is a blunt instrument and no one wanted to use it, but he felt the town was being put in a corner.

Bettencourt pushed back on the idea the soccer club was unwilling to negotiate, stating the club had been engaged and willing to negotiate.

In a statement from the Winchester Soccer Club, President Brad Coffey said the club is happy to work with the town on the final phase of the flood mitigation project.

“We understand the importance of the project and are happy to support this final piece,” he said.

Winchester Soccer Club is a volunteer-led nonprofit serving over 2,000 players and families in the Winchester Community. Coffey said the top priority is ensuring kids get access to play in a safe and healthy environment.

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"Like any large engineering project, there are questions about the timing, scope, and impact of this phase of the Flood Mitigation Project," he said. "We appreciate the town's efforts to work with us on understanding those important elements and in developing a plan to minimize the impact on our families."

Coffey said the club is glad a solution was reached that allows the project to move forward while protecting players.

It was last minute negotiations with Prior, Select Board member Anthea Brady and Town Manager Beth Rudolph that put an end to the threat.

In a brief email Friday morning, Prior said, "The Select Board voted to rescind the vote to call a Town Meeting on June 23."

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